

BLACK DUCKS

By Steve Lyda, Alabama Forestry Commission

Photo by Dan Brothers. Used with permission of the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel

The Alabama Piedmont is comprised of four or five counties in the northeast portion of the state – the most notable being Etowah and Cherokee counties – for it is clearly evident that here you are in the southern Appalachian foothills. As improbable as it sounds, mallards, wood ducks, and occasionally migrating Black Ducks have traded southeast through the tight ridge and valley corridors for hundreds of years using these secretive hideaways and small isolated ponds, engineered by one of North America's most maligned rodents. Largely left to his own

devices in the past century, beaver have continued to build dams, back up creeks and streams, gnaw down willow and cottonwood saplings, and cause general misery to eastern landowners who prefer leather uppers to knee-high rubber boots. As a practicing forester, I am sympathetic; but to his credit, the adroit little beaver is a master in creating and maintaining waterfowl habitat.

These impoundments are numerous in the boreal forest breeding grounds in Nova Scotia and Quebec, and as far north as Labrador. Winter quarters in the southern states however, consist of widely dis-

persed ponds ranging in size from half-acre kills to five-acre green timber sprawls. The American Black Duck, *Anas rubripes*, faces serious gene pool dilution from hybridizing with mallards and they will simply not exist in the future as a distinct species without water in the woods. Long ago I stopped setting conibear-traps and breaking dams because an acre of timber has no spiritual comparison to Black Ducks.

By late fall, water in the northern latitudes begins to lock up and birds start moving south. The Appalachian Trail runs more than twenty-one hundred miles along America's eastern seaboard from Maine to Georgia, and it shadows the Black's broad southern migration path from saltwater marsh to the mountains' gentle east face and down through New England farmland and the North Carolina hills. My guess is that a portion of these birds cross a historic gap between Hiwassee and Springer Mountain in North Georgia to find their way to a broad plain or geologic table in North Alabama between Wheeler National Refuge and the Coosa River. Their course takes them over tall church steeples in Scottsboro and high above the German dairy farms scattered around the communities of Hokes Bluff, Leesburg, and Ballplay. Here, they settle out and scatter into even smaller family groups at Will's Creek and to the southeast along Black Creek Swamp, where Nathan Bedford Forrest decided to ford the river on the heels of Streight's U.S. Cavalry. After they cross this line, west of the mountain pass, the *Royal Blacks* of the famed east coast marshes become aloof and wary highlanders, puddle jumping the many miles of backwoods sloughs. Few of them will be seen or heard from again until their safe arrival in the spring in southern Canada.

The beaver ponds and creeks in Alabama's piedmont region are tucked away in steep hardwood coves; they are difficult to locate without an Indian guide, and a true adventure to reach at night. If you arrive at the little shore in time for coffee and sunrise, you're already late because unlike mallards that leisurely visit well into the warm morning when the frost and raccoons have retreated home, wood ducks and especially Black Ducks, are early flyers. Having met their obligation to fly over silver ridge tops and

down through darkened timberland, they're in for the day.

Most certainly an angry wind will keep them stirring around, but they prefer to spend daylight to dusk in backwater button brush feeding on beechnuts, acorns, and soft mast from the gum trees. Of course there is other business to tend to such as preening, courting, and pre-nuptial displays, then budget enough time for loafing, and the day is pretty well gone. All of this activity or inactivity is carried out as far from predators as possible, as is their right. The security of remote beaver ponds is very high on the Black Ducks' priority list and the only phenomena that moves them south – for they are hardy ducks and notoriously slow to migrate – are appalling winter storms with freeze-ups and the slightest amount of hunting pressure. The echo of gun shots rolling through the deep hardwood bottoms will have Blacks Ducks on the doorstep saying goodbyes to their host and anxious to find new neighbors.

Technically, this part of the state is in the Mississippi flyway but its close proximity to the eastern fringe tends to mix birds. On high visibility days, I have chosen to sit it out until late morning and spotted the silver bellies and glints of greenheads very high above the tree lines. They're flight ducks quickly moving south on a cutting north wind, and fly they can – with purpose. I've wondered if the birds have flown straight through the

New England night with icy air flowing over sleek lines and contour feathers, forming fast crystals on their forward expressions. These small flocks of mallards are often associated with several Blacks at the front of the formation and their dark creosol bodies are contrasted by the flaring white under linings of powerful wings as they most often break ranks with the pack to avoid spiraling down in haste and misgiving. The Black is a hard bird to decoy, an extremely tough customer in all respects. With such low probabilities, they are not hunted in this area as an exclusive species, but rather as an incidental to mallards. After all his accolades, he is just that – a black mallard, but quite a diamond on a heavy duck strap of greenheads at the close of a morning hunt.

I know a couple of locations where an annual showing is probable at best, the exercise all you can stand, and the late-winter beauty exceptional. The area has a system or chain of beaver ponds and the landscape has changed very little since I was old enough to tote sacks of duck decoys up and down ridges. I was lucky on two consecutive mornings that arrived with snow and mallards on the same canvas. It was also here that I witnessed my first and only pure flock, a dozen Black Ducks, being driven in by a winter gale that would rival anything in the northern

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Timber and Pond Management for Waterfowl

No one can control the weather, which determines the seasonal migration patterns of black ducks, wood ducks, and mallards – but a landowner who provides optimum habitat will usually be rewarded by late winter in Alabama. If a landowner is working with existing beaver ponds or enhanced waterfowl habitat in the form of flooded green tree reservoirs, controlling water levels is the most important key. The hydrologic characteristics of small watersheds can be modified by the ability to flood and drain them. Draining ponds in the growing months provides opportunities for native vegetation to flourish, and in some cases, the supplemental plantings of mudflats to Japanese millet or Egyptian wheat.

The two most common drainage devices are the three-log drain and the beaver pond leveler developed by Clemson University. In the southeast, hard mast such as acorns and beechnuts along the shallows are excellent energy foods for waterfowl. Large mature timber along the water line should be retained, and if the pond is relatively new, it should be drained in mid-March to prevent these trees from dying, and allowed to re-flood by rainwater in the dormant months from October to February.

Dabbling ducks prefer water levels less than 18 inches, so a landowner does not have to invest in expensive pumps. In some cases, ponds with an abundance of immersed plants like smartweed, arrowhead, and spike rush and floating aquatics such as common duckweed and watermeal are best left undisturbed.

After beavers have created permanently flooded wetlands, some inferior trees will die and the canopy opens, making suitable conditions for the growth of native plants, invertebrates, and semi-aquatic vegetation. This successional pattern leads to a well-developed shrub layer with seed production and standing snags that provide roosting habitat for ducks at night. The wetland complex or mosaic created by beaver, combined with thoughtful vegetative manipulation by land managers, can easily turn a liability into an early morning sky of whistling wings. ♣



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Black Ducks

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reaches of the flyway. The little ponds are precisely a mile and a half from nowhere and a few hundred yards beyond that. In other words, I like to think they are mine alone, a jeweled necklace of water, deep in a seamless tract of hardwood hills where sometimes the ducks come hard at angles down through a tangle of beech and ash at deceptive speed. Sometimes they hang suspended at gun range above bare and powerful oak arms that pierce a blue curtain of January sky. Sometimes they don't come at all.

Successful or not, I cannot remember "a good walk wasted" in Black Duck country. The solitude and quiet of the piedmont hills is broken only by the

reedy calls and chatter of heavy dark ducks at first light. Much later, the low rumble of GM&O freight moving somewhere in the distant Coosa Valley reminds me of the long haul out to Anderson Bluff. I retrace my steps and move around the blackberry and greenbrier thicket that I waded through in early black robed confusion. Last month's autumn color lays in heaps on the forest floor and sounds like piles of cornflakes assaulted by heavy boots. Chickadees, juncos, and flickers escort me upslope as a gray squirrel barks General Forrest's orders for me to press on. But I stop . . . a last drink of cold winter air.

Once more, the woods are still. ☾

References

*Clemson levelers and wood duck nest boxes can be obtained through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service program: **Partners in Wildlife**.*

*For more extensive information refer to: **Managing Wildlife**, Alabama Wildlife Federation, Greg and Deborah Yarrow, 1999, or **Managing Beaver to Benefit Waterfowl** 13.4.7, James Ringelman, Colorado Division of Wildlife, 1991.*

Building Partnerships

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that vision should respect both their economic and their ecological viability.

(3) In the more than 200,000,000 acres of Southern forestland there is enough space to meet many objectives to protect multiple forest values. Intensive forestry, protected areas, and the diverse forest management approaches of non-industrial owners all have their places. There is no need to pit conservation against production forestry. Conserved areas function most effectively in a larger forested landscape. Keeping forests as forests should be our underlying and unifying goal.

(4) We should think long term — 50 years or more — if we are to protect the values of Southern forests.

(5) We should think about conservation strategies and incentives at a landscape scale if we expect forests to survive over that long term.

(6) We must respect the equity of landowners and the values of communities in developing improved forestry programs.

So with these threats, strategies, and principles in mind, our groups are respectfully proposing the following short-term agenda for action on several important federal forestry programs. As I noted earlier, we recognize that the state foresters and others are more important players than we are, but we hope to cre-

ate a coalition that is more effective than any of us working on our own.

•**The Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP)**, can be effective because it works through your agencies, is the only Farm Bill Program specifically directed toward the tens of millions of acres of privately owned forestland, and is desperately needed

to assist the growing number of non-industrial private landowners in managing their land for multiple purposes.

•**The Forest Stewardship Program** is critical to supporting sound forest management by the 5.5 million landowners who own 89 % of the forestland in the South. [We should

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